

MEMORANDUM

TO: H. S. Rowen, Charles Wolf DATE: 4/18/68
FROM: Daniel Ellsberg
SUBJECT: PROSPECTUS FOR PERSONAL RESEARCH ON VIETNAM

I propose to produce, initially, a set of separate essays on the conflict in Vietnam and U.S. participation in it, based on notes and reflections on my experiences there: without paying too great attention, in the first instance, to overall coherence of topics or to the question of selection and organization of pieces that might subsequently be included in a book. However, the essays should fall into two related categories, which might be titled:

1. Violent Politics: Revolution and counterrevolution in Vietnam.
2. The Sea of Pigs: Lessons from failure in Vietnam.

The orientation of all the essays will be toward learning lessons from past experience in Vietnam, exposing problems and drawing tentative generalizations and conclusions that should be relevant to future U.S. policy, in Vietnam, and in similar situations elsewhere. Many of these topics might be the subject of sessions of the "Vietnam Lessons" seminar; in any case, I would like them to contribute to discussion and research within RAND, whether or not particular pieces later form part of a book. To the end of getting a variety of thoughts down on paper as soon as possible, to stimulate and benefit by discussion within RAND, my first move would be to build on some earlier notes and memos. E.g., the first draft of what could evolve into a coherent discussion of pacification would emerge by adding comments, illustrative examples, elaborations and second thoughts to such earlier memos as, "Visit to an insecure province," "Revolutionary Development: Concept and Critique" (Part II of the Jacobson Roles and Missions Report), "Prospects for RD Progress in 1967." Likewise, my piece on "Ky and the U.S. stakes in the coming elections in Vietnam" could be the basis for several pieces on politics in Vietnam and US/Vietnamese relations. Moreover, relevant parts of a number of trip reports and memoranda of conversations not previously transcribed from my notes need writing up, for incorporation in various essays.

A. Some of the separate pieces under the first heading of "Violent Politics" would cover:

1. Pacification. (This area would occupy several pieces initially.) Common features (and differences) of successive pacification concepts; recurrent problems and failures in implementation, and recurrent failure to address "implementation" as a problem or constraint; alternative concepts of pacification (giving varying weights or content to: military action against main force units, local forces or guerrillas; police/intelligence

activity; cadre; economic/social welfare aid; administrative improvement; popular participation; political development; defector policy; troop behavior), including the views of such advisors as Thompson, Duncanson, Lansdale, Bohannon and Valeriano, Hilsman, Chau, Vann, Serong, and Barlow; and such writers as Galula, Trinquier and C. Johnson; the U.S. concept of Revolutionary Development in 1966-68, and the contrast in each specific dimension above between concept and reality; gaps and defects in the 1966-68 RD approach as conceived; the need for radical reform in military, administrative and political structures if any pacification efforts are to be effective.

2. VC "pacification" efforts in the countryside; the contrast in tactics and effectiveness of these (along with considerable similarity in form and aims) with the GVN/US programs; causes of the contrast, and prospects for future competitions between Communists and non-Communists in the countryside of Vietnam or elsewhere.

3. Case study: the ARVN 25th Division. Performance, 1966-67; attitudes of advisors, and higher-level suppression of critiques; efforts by division and corps senior advisors to remove the division commander; MACV study (spring 1966) and Westmoreland response; impact of performance on RD prospects in division TAOR; background and causes of performance; confrontation of division commander and senior advisor, fall of 1967; newspaper reporting, and MACV reaction; particular reference to 46th Regiment.

4. Case study: ARVN misconduct toward population, and MACV under-rating and misreporting of problem, exemplified by ARVN 5th Division in Binh Duong.

5. RD Cadre. Origins of the program; bureaucratic pressures on aims and evolution of the program; GVN/US frictions in administration; the need for "cadre;" contrast with VC "cadres;" defects in concept; contrast between concept and reality; fate of program, 1967-68; lessons for prospective use of similar cadres elsewhere.

6. Comprehensive treatment of pacification efforts would benefit from provincial case studies of such provinces as Hau Nghia, Long An, An Giang, Binh Dinh, and Quang Nam (I have extensive material, though not complete, only on the first, with some observations on the others), and would require discussions and case studies of the following topics, on each of which I can contribute only scattered comments and observations: the Hop Tac program and the "National Priority Areas;" USMC, and ROK, concepts and practices of "pacification;" USA experiments in pacification in III Corps (including the forced relocation of Ben Suc, the occupation of Rach Kien, Operation Fairfax combining U.S. and Vietnamese forces); U.S.-promoted intelligence operations, including "County Fairs," Provincial Reconnaissance Units (Counter-terror teams), Provincial Interrogation Centers, District Operations and Intelligence Centers, ICEX and Phoenix programs for intelligence coordination; Chieu Hoi program; refugee programs; the strategic hamlet program. I will set down what I have to

say on these matters, as inputs to possible future studies by others (and for inclusion elsewhere in my essays).

7. The relation of urban unrest and urban programs to pacification efforts in the countryside. The neglect of urban attitudes and problems; the actual impact of urban unrest on government instability and the administration of rural programs; the case for emphasis on "pacification of the 'blue' area;" the social and political significance of the refugee flows of 1965-68.

8. Corruption as a problem. Forms of corruption; relative impact on programs and effectiveness, and particularly on the quality of commanders and officials; U.S. attitudes; possible measures for reducing overall impact of "harmful" forms, in countries like Vietnam.

9. Popular participation, as a factor in insurgency and counter-insurgency. Varying views of the importance or criticality of public involvement on one side or the other in the conflict, and on the feasibility and methods of influencing such participation; contrast between VC and GVN success in achieving such participation, and reasons why the GVN has fallen short of its goals; varying requirements for participation under different circumstances, and alternative approaches for achieving various levels and forms; political (as contrasted to "pacification") approaches to this end; the relevance of national-level politics and administration. The aim of this discussion would be concepts, hypotheses and generalizations broadly applicable beyond Vietnam, drawing heavily upon Vietnam experience but also upon experience in the Philippines, Malaya and elsewhere, and comparing the views of such writers as those mentioned earlier under "pacification" (with the addition of Ton That Thien, Vu Van Thai, and Leites and Wolf).

10. Motivation of officials, commanders, cadres, subordinate officers, troops, national leadership -- as a factor in insurgency and counterinsurgency. The structure of motivation within the VC, and GVN/ARVN; efforts on each side to influence motivation; limitations of GVN efforts, and impact of motivational problem on pacification and competition with the VC; the relevance of national-level politics; impact of the U.S.

B. Under the second heading above (lessons from U.S. policy and failures in Vietnam), some of the subjects to be covered would be:

1. How not to learn from experience. Slowness and inadequacy of the U.S. learning process in Vietnam; the recurrence of problems, approaches, failures; bureaucratic and conceptual obstacles to learning; the reporting problem; rotation policy and the lack of memory; failure to address the problem of learning; inertia and inflexibility in U.S. agencies and commands.

2. Crises in quicksand: the escalation of the U.S. commitment and involvement, 1961, 1963, 1965, 1966-67. U.S. perceptions of U.S. goals, interests, risks, domestic political requirements; U.S. perceptions of

the problem in Vietnam and of U.S. ability to influence the situation; (under)estimates of the VC, and (over)estimates of the GVN/ARVN; the pathology of optimism.

3. The militarization of the U.S. involvement. Early analyses of interdependencies and vicious circles in the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary complex in Vietnam, of complexities, of political factors and limitations; progressive simplification of the challenge, and emphasis on (a limited set of) military factors; bureaucratic and conceptual factors in this process.

4. US/Vietnamese relations. The U.S. as "advisors" and interventionists; U.S. influence and aims in (various) Vietnamese eyes; U.S. influence and active intervention in U.S. eyes; methods of U.S. influence and their potential, as perceived by U.S. decisionmakers and as tested by experience; the sources of anti-U.S. feelings; U.S. relations with the Vietnamese military; U.S. impact on Vietnamese politics; Vietnamese manipulation of US/Vietnamese relationships, exploration of U.S. attitudes and practices.

5. Lessons for the Vietnamese (and others) on the U.S. role in revolutionary conflicts. The dynamics of U.S. involvement and intervention, as they might appear to an outsider or partner; the characteristics of the U.S. as advisor and ally; U.S.-preferred methods and institutions; the perceived effectiveness of U.S. agencies and approaches against a Communist insurgency; the impact of the U.S. -- and the U.S. way of war -- upon Vietnam.

6. Modes of U.S. influence. Limitations on U.S. ability to influence effectively the government and society of an underdeveloped nation; varying U.S. conceptions of available modes, and constraints; limitations of U.S. organization, attitudes, and personnel, with respect to effective intervention; the failure of the military advisory system, and reasons; the problem of level of intervention (e.g., battalion vs. JGS, provinces vs. Saigon), and factors that conditioned U.S. choices of level.

7. Morality of means. Developments in Vietnam that raise the issue of morality, and attitudes and considerations that condition judgments of relative moral acceptability; the potential impact of moral judgments on U.S. policy, in conduct or intervention in counter-insurgency; basis for judging specific practices of the U.S. or its Allies (and the VC) "immoral;" consequences of such judgments, in internal U.S. affairs and its foreign relations.

8. When not to intervene. Criteria for resisting, avoiding, reducing, terminating, or limiting U.S. intervention in the conflicts or domestic affairs of other nations, in the face of appeals, domestic pressures, or plausible arguments for intervention; how to "non-intervene;" specific risks, costs, advantages and disadvantages of particular modes and levels of intervention; the implications for U.S. policy and decisions

- on intervention of a realistic assessment of U.S. ignorance, in its various forms; reassessment of the past, perceived aims and general arguments for intervention (e.g., "domino theory," challenge of Chicoms, importance of outside -- DRV -- support to VC insurgency, perceptions of the nature and impact of Communist rule and its practical alternatives, feasibility and effectiveness of various forms of U.S. intervention).

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